

ความสัมพันธ์เชิงอำนาจระหว่างเพศที่ไม่เท่าเทียมในภาพยนตร์ฮอลลีวูด

Imbalanced Power Relations between Genders in Hollywood films

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บทความนี้มุ่งหมายจะแสดงให้เห็นว่าภาพยนตร์ยอดนิยมที่ใช้นักแสดงนำหญิงจำนวนหนึ่ง ยังถูกสร้างภายใต้ค่านิยมชายเป็นใหญ่โดยการทบทวนบทความที่ได้วิจารณ์ภาพยนตร์ฮอลลีวูด มาสนับสนุนประเด็นดังกล่าว ความสัมพันธ์เชิงอำนาจสามารถศึกษาได้จากสิ่งที่ถูกประกอบสร้างขึ้นในภาพยนตร์ทั้งวัจนภาษาในบทพูดและอวัจนภาษาในภาพบนจอ ภาพยนตร์นั้นถูกสร้างด้วยการนำเสนอผ่านทางกรมองภาพจึงมีอิทธิพลอย่างมากต่อสังคมและยังสามารถแพร่กระจายออกไปได้อย่างกว้างขวาง เพื่อที่จะสร้างความรู้เท่าทันสื่อในผู้ชมภาพยนตร์จึงจำเป็นต้องวิเคราะห์ผ่านรูปแบบของวาทกรรมภาพยนตร์ บทความนี้แบ่งออกเป็นห้าส่วน ส่วนแรกมุ่งกล่าวถึงภาพยนตร์ที่ผลิตซ้ำความสัมพันธ์เชิงอำนาจระหว่างเพศที่ไม่เท่าเทียม ส่วนที่สองกล่าวถึงภาพยนตร์ในฐานะวาทกรรม ส่วนที่สามกล่าวถึงกรอบความคิดเชิงสัญลักษณ์ที่ใช้เป็นเครื่องมือในการวิเคราะห์ภาพยนตร์ได้ทั้งทางวัจนและอวัจนภาษา ส่วนที่สี่เน้นความสำคัญของแนวคิด “การจ้องมองแบบผู้ชาย” จาก ลอรา มัลวี นักทฤษฎีสตรีนิยมที่ใช้การวิเคราะห์โครงสร้างภาพยนตร์ที่สร้างขึ้นในบริษัทสังคมนาย เป็นใหญ่ ส่วนสุดท้ายนำเสนอการศึกษาที่วิพากษ์วิจารณ์ภาพยนตร์ฮอลลีวูดที่ใช้นักแสดงนำหญิง ในการนำเสนอแนวคิดสตรีนิยมจอมปลอม บทความนี้แสดงให้เห็นว่าภาพยนตร์ฮอลลีวูดหลายเรื่อง ถูกสร้างขึ้นภายใต้อิทธิพลชายเป็นใหญ่ถึงแม้ว่าตัวละครนำหญิงดูเหมือนจะได้รับอำนาจ แต่พวกหล่อนยังคงถูกนำเสนอให้เป็นรองต่อผู้ชายเมื่อผ่านการตีความในระดับกลุ่มลึกขึ้น ดังนั้นผู้ชมควรรู้เท่าทันว่าแท้จริงแล้วผู้ผลิตภาพยนตร์ได้ประกอบสร้างสังคมแบบหนึ่งขึ้นมาภายใต้ความเชื่อทัศนคติ และคุณค่าของตนบรรจุเข้าไปในภาพยนตร์ที่พวกเขาสร้าง

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Abstract

This article demonstrates that a certain amount of popular female lead films are created under patriarchal values. Several academic sources, which criticize about gender inequality in Hollywood films, are reviewed to support this point. The notion of power relations can be examined through the film's structure, dialogues and

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visual images. Since a film is created basically on visual representations and has a wide circulation, it has a powerful impact on society. In order to promote media literacy among film watchers, it is necessary to analyze a film as a discourse. This article is divided into five parts. The first one focuses on how a film is regarded as a reproduction of imbalanced sexual power relation. For the second part, as a means to raise audiences' awareness, it is essential to consider a film as a medium and analyze it as a discourse. Regarding the third part, the concept of signs or semiotics is introduced as a tool to analyze the film's verbal and pictorial systems. The fourth part highlights the significance of the notion of "male gaze" from Laura Mulvey's classic feminist film theory. The final part presents academic studies which criticize Hollywood's female lead films as pseudo-feminist films. It is notable that many Hollywood film productions have been created under patriarchal dominance. Although the principal females in the films are likely to fulfill their power, they are portrayed as subordinate to men at a deeper interpretative level. Thus, it is important for film watchers to be aware that the film is a kind of social fabrication based on the filmmakers' beliefs, attitudes and values.

Keywords : Power Relations, Gender, Film, Discourse, Signs, Feminism, Verbal and non-verbal languages

Introduction

As a genre of media, films serve not only as an artistic way of communication which provides entertainment but also as a means to influence audiences in subtle ways. In other words, film is like a literary work in that it can be enjoyed and at the same time communicates powerful ideas and values. Films communicate through the dialogues, such techniques as shots, angles, lighting, framing cinematography, acting, and soundtrack. As soon as movies are presented, the reality is constructed through the filmmaker's techniques. Generally, people's decisions about how to live and what sort of person to become will be made in reference to social pressures and normative expectations and films are an important contributor to such social codes. They are even a force for social control. In this sense, films can affect audiences in subtle ways and cannot be overlooked as mere entertainment. This is to say that a film can be regarded as a kind of social discourse.

Film is a construction, not only by the technical personnel such as the director or cameraman but also by the larger institutions like Hollywood. Nowadays, film

is a genuine expression of popular tastes. Major motion pictures today are always test-marketed to see if they appeal to audiences. Recently, Hollywood's female lead films are one of the most successful film genres showing that the audience has pleasure in seeing the strength in woman. It might also mean that the audience is becoming attracted by gender ideas behind the production itself. Therefore, it is interesting to study how the appeal in those films with female protagonist influences and manipulates film watchers, especially in terms of hegemony and power relations.

Film as a reproduction of imbalanced sexual power relation

As noted by Gramsci (1995), the term “hegemony” or predominance by consent is a constructed ideological domination that can be transmitted through language. Teun A. van Dijk (1993), a language scholar whose work can be seen to have been influenced by the Gramscian school of thought, made a mention of hegemony that:

It may also be supported or condoned by other group members, sanctioned by the courts, legitimated by laws, enforced by the police, and ideologically sustained and reproduced by the media or text-books. This social, political and cultural organization of dominance also implies a hierarchy of power: some members of dominant groups and organizations have a special role in planning, decision-making and control over the relations and processes of the enactment of power. (van Dijk 1993 : 255)

Hegemony in power relations can be found in every culture in different forms, including film as a reproduction of social ideologies. Through analyses of verbal and visual language, unequal power relations between genders can be detected in a large number of Hollywood films. Mostly, these involve representations of women under masculine authority. In most Hollywood films, the portrayals of femininity are constructed under this male-dominant worldview. According to the website New York Film Academy (2013), there are sharp-cut demographic evidences revealing that gender inequality exists in Hollywood industry.

HOW WOMEN ARE PORTRAYED

ON SCREEN IN THE TOP 500 FILMS

2007-2012

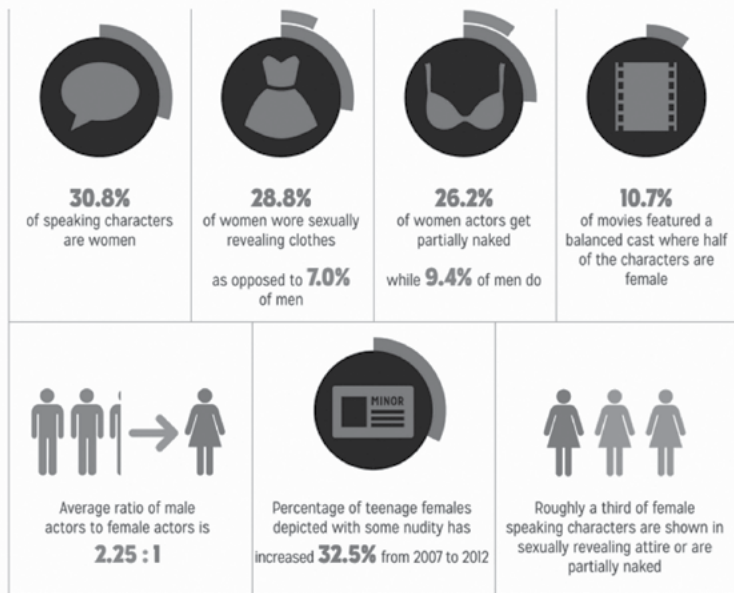


Figure1: New York Film Academy presents gender inequality in Hollywood films. (<https://www.nyfa.edu>)

From the top 500 productions between 2007 and 2012, the diagram above shows that female characters were represented on screen in a subservient status to male characters. There is a higher percentage of female than male characters that were portrayed as sex object while the majority of film actors who have dialogues are men. Furthermore, inequality between genders can be recognized in many contemporary film productions, particularly in terms of the cast selection for the leading roles. According to a report from The Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, San Diego State University, it was found that in the year 2014 the majority of female characters in the top grossing films were still portrayed in submissive roles. Statistics show that only 12% of all notable protagonists were female. In addition, only 5% of female characters are portrayed as leaders who were in control of particular groups or situations (Cipriani, 2015).

Film as a discourse

In order to understand what brought success to female lead films in Hollywood Industry, it is essential to see the films as a medium and analyze it as a discourse. Film is one of the ways a society talks to itself and exchanges information with other cultures. To a large extent, the language of film-making, including verbal and non-verbal mechanisms, consciously aims to influence the viewer's emotions and unconsciously serves to construct, shape, reproduce or inscribe social and cultural ideologies in the film. Turner (2001) maintains that film is equivalent to a language in that it constructs meaning through its coded use of dialogue, cinematography and sound editing. He contends that film, as another form of language, is one of the powerfully constructed codes affecting culture. It can "produce the behaviors, the practices, the institutions and the meaning which constitute our social existence" (Turner 2001: 52). Functioning as a language, film generates its meaning through systems, especially through the medium's photographic and semiotic language systems. As noted by Kawin (1987: 54)

Photography itself, on which the medium of cinema principally depends, directs the viewer in two opposite directions and to reconcile these directions is a vital aspect of understanding any motive or even any shot...But a photograph is not a simple thing, and once several photographs are arranged into a structure, that structure reveals a mystery of its own, for it begins to display some of the attributes of language: a signifying system.

Seeing film as composed of a system of meaning creating language amounts is seeing film as a discourse. As soon as a movie is projected, hegemonic reality is constructed through the filmmaker's systems of various cinematic techniques. Since the filmmakers mainly communicate their powerful ideas through visual images, certain significant film techniques should be considered, especially those concerning photography and cinematography. Basic film language is the frame or photographed image. The camera is a tool for filmmakers to create various perspectives. Rose (1972) demonstrates that camera techniques such as shots and angles are intentionally chosen to create different perceptions for audiences. A shot is seen on the screen from the time the camera is turned on until it is turned off while an angle is where the camera is placed in relation to what is being filmed. Hegemony in power relations can be fabricated by camera compositions. For example, "low angle" creates image of a powerful character who looks dominant, aggressive, or ominous whereas the position of "high angle" makes characters look weak, submissive,

or frightened (Moura, 2014). Apart from shots and angles, other conventions also serve to construct meaning and perspectives in film such as framing, coloring, costumes, lighting, editing and the use of signs and “gaze”. In this article, emphasis is placed on the last two film conventions.

Signs or Semiotics

Another way to understand power relation between genders in films is through semiotics or the study of signs. The concept of signs has been discussed among philosophers and linguists for many years. Some of them have conducted very interesting discussions about signs and the creation of meaning from the use of signs. Kawin (1987) notes that sign is a relationship between “signifier” and “signified”. The signifier is the physical form of the sign such as the image, sound, word or photograph whereas the signified is the mental concept or idea referred to. The meaning of each sign can be read on at least two levels which are “denotative” and “connotative” meanings (Turner 2001: 54). The denotative meaning is a literal level of meaning that contains a fixed relationship between the word and the object. On the other hand, the connotative meaning is interpretative and depends on personal cultural experience. For instance, the image of “sunrise” in the film on the denotative level refers to the beginning of the day, and the end of night. However, on the connotative level, the sunrise in filmmakers’ mind-set can be interpreted as hope, birth or the beginning of life. According to Louise Giannetti (1993), film uses sign to communicate and establish thoughts or attitudes of the film maker (Giannetti 1993: 434). It is also possible that within a single frame, many signs can be seen though most audiences normally focus on the dominant one. For example, in one frame, a low-angle shot can encode a cowboy as a figure of power, just as his white hat can encode the cowboy as a hero and a jump cut can act as a sign of discontinuity. However, the audiences may focus only on the white cowboy hat and perceive that the man wearing the hat is a hero. In film, semiotics is an important and influential tool that can affect film watcher’s perceptions.

The system of signs includes verbal language as well. Chandler (2017) notes that in the case of linguistic signs, the denotative meaning is in accordance with literal meanings of a certain word or sentence whereas connotative meaning refers to the “socio-cultural” and “personal associations” of the sign. These meanings are typically related to the interpreters’ age, gender, ethnicity and ideological or emotional background. To illustrate this point, the denotative meaning of the word

“knockout” is an act of knocking someone out in boxing (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com>). However, in a connotative level, such word can be regarded as a compliment for an impressive thing or it can imply a sexist expression when referring to a woman (<http://examples.yourdictionary.com>). Screenplays and dialogues are then an important part of the film. It is contended that connotative or hidden meanings and social ideologies can also be revealed through analysis of verbal elements of a film. Power relations, for instance, can be seen in the use of active-passive sentence structures, imperative sentences and different word choices spoken by the male-female characters.

In many recent studies, the use of semiotics and the concept of “male gaze” have served as tools to deconstruct female led films, uncovering the true power of women on screen.

Gaze and Feminism in film

To a large extent, in analyzing film as a visual culture, the “gaze” in feminist film theory is practical as a means to investigate imbalance of power between male and female characters in the film. The concept of “gaze” derives from the article, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* by Laura Mulvey (1990), a feminist film theorist. Mulvey uses psychoanalysis to understand the enchantment of Hollywood cinema. Mulvey refers to Freud’s notion of “scopophilia”, which is a fundamental erotic drive of human beings. Such a notion is described as the pleasure involved in looking at other people’s bodies as sexual objects. And, the fascination of Hollywood films can be explained through this notion (Mulvey 1990: 30).

Mulvey (1990) argues that the desire to look can be aroused by integrating structures of voyeurism and narcissism into the story and the image. “Voyeuristic” visual pleasure is created through the process of objectification of female characters whereas “narcissistic” visual pleasure is derived from self-identification with the figure in the ideal image on the screen. In addition, Mulvey distinguishes the characteristics of males and females by using a scale based on activity and passivity. This binary opposition is described saying that in a patriarchal society “... pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female”. The male character is normally portrayed as active and powerful. The narrative structure of traditional cinema always focuses on the male protagonist and his perspective. In contrast, the female character is regarded as passive and powerless. Women can only be the object of desire for men. Such sexual difference is invented in order

to establish male heroism. In this sense, the action of possessing a gaze can be identified as belonging to males, technically called the "male gaze". The form of gaze can be doubled "...as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium" (Mulvey 1990: 30-33).

Moreover, according to Mulvey (1990), in classical cinema, there are two treatments for male "castration anxiety". Since female appearance reminds the male subject of the lack of a penis, the threat of castration can be solved either in narrative structure or through "fetishism". To relieve the "castration anxiety" in the narrative sense, the female character has to be found guilty. Consequently, punishment or salvations are classic responses of the women's "guilt". It can be witnessed that the film story always offers two women's traditional endings which are death or marriage. Thus, Mulvey (1990) argues that such endings have associations with "sadism". For "fetishism", the fetishistic look involves "[t]he substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous. This builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself. The erotic instinct is focused on the look alone" (Mulvey 1990: 35)

As said by Mulvey (1990), making a fetish of the woman changes her from a dangerous figure into a satisfying object of perfect beauty. Hence, the image of "fetish" leads to overvaluation of the female image and to the craze of the female movie star. Marilyn Monroe, the sex symbol, is an example of a female star made into a fetish. Fetishism in film makes the fantasized female figure become real but fails to represent the truth of the woman outside the patriarchal norm. Therefore, the notion of "the male gaze" is shorthand for the analysis of complex mechanisms in cinema, including structures like voyeurism, narcissism and fetishism. These concepts help to understand how Hollywood cinema has been specially designed to fulfill the masculine desire which lurk behind the superficial portrayal of the femininity.

Pseudo Feminism in Hollywood Industry

Hollywood industry has recently been overwhelmed by a rising wave of "Women Empowerment". Women Empowerment refers to increasing and improving women's status to be equal to men's so they can live their life with a sense of self-worth, respect and dignity. Females must be encouraged to make their own self-determination, get their voices heard, and have complete control of their life both within and outside of their home (Oxaal, 1997).

Hollywood receives many strong criticisms of misleading portrayal of female characters despite the fact that female lead movies is currently ruling over the market. To illustrate this point, Walsh (2015) criticized one of the big budget action films, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) that such movie represented Scarlett Johansson's Natasha Romanoff as a deceptive empowered female character. The character Natasha Romanoff is a member of the Avengers team. Without a supernatural power, she can be viewed as a heroine who achieves the team's missions by exercising her cleverness and martial talent. Although this unique character leads Scarlett Johansson to her popularity, the heroine's power of this character is flawed as the filmmaker literally associates her infertility with monstrosity through both visual and verbal techniques (Walsh, 2015).

Visually, the image of *The Hulk* is used as a sign that connotes Romanoff's inability to conceive children. When the filmmaker presents a flashback scene of the young Romanoff's sterile operation, there is a close up shot of the hulk's aggressive face showing up. Moreover, her monstrous image is verbally emphasized through her private dialogue with Bruce Banner, the hulk, who will never be able to settle down and have family. She says "You know what my final test was in the Red Room? They sterilized me, said it was one less thing to worry about. You think you're the only loner on the team?" The sentence "They sterilized me" has Romanoff in the object position, making her the powerless receiver of the action as well.

The other debatable case is the latest film *Wonder Woman* (2017). Despite the fact that this women-led film was directed by woman director, Patty Jenkin, the film is criticized by worldwide audiences as a "masterpiece of subversive feminism" (Williams, 2017). The power of such heroine is ambiguous on the screen in a certain point. While this film tells a story of an empowered female protagonist who fights evil forces for the greater good, Gal Godot's *Wonder Woman* are turned into a "fetish", a perfect object of beauty which is visually satisfying rather than having great power. *Wonder Woman*'s costume is also created to lessen her power.

Although *Wonder Woman* was allowed to exercise her superpowers with several heroic fighting scenes, her iconic strapless amour and weapons including cuffs and a lasso can be related to sense of bondage (Ring, 2017). According to DC database website, *Wonder Woman* wears a pair of metal cuffs called "Bracelets of Submission" as a reminder of her oppressive roots. Diana, the *Wonder Woman*, comes from Amazons, the no man's land. Originally, Amazons are part of a patriarchal monarchic system where all female warriors are ruled by Zeus, a male authoritative

figure. (<http://dc.wikia.com>). Thus, wearing the outfit, Wonder Woman is not only portrayed as the “gaze” but also a symbol of female slavery.

Regarding verbal mechanism, it was found that some oppressive points appear through the screenplays and dialogues in several female lead movies. As reported by a new research from University of Washington (UW) computer scientists, the team revealed hidden gender bias in verbal techniques used in films. By using machine-learning-based tools to analyze the language in approximately 800 movie scripts, the UW researchers created “connotation frames” that categorize how different verbs can strengthen or weaken different characters through their connotative meanings. The collected data show a relationship between “power” and “agency” dimensions. The “power” dimension shows whether a character has authority over another character, while the “agency” dimension means whether a character has control over his or her life or storyline.

As a result, the program revealed that male characters tended to express their domineering statements, whereas women were more likely to “hedge” their opinion (Langston, 2017). According to this study, male characters were empowered by their imperative sentences and verbs like finish, betray, construct, destroy, assign or compose. On the other hand, words that imply low power and uncertainty such as ask, wait, relax, need, or apologize potentially belonged to female characters (Langston, 2017).

For instance, one of the most famous films with a female protagonist, *Black Swan* (2010) portrays gender hierarchy in a subtle way. Langston (2017) notes that the film’s dialogue narratively lets the main character, a perfectionist ballerina, have control over her own life by giving her more “agency”. However, male characters were written with more “power” in stage directions. In this sense, the filmmakers presented her professional submissive role in the film. Moreover, in the film *Juno* (2007), although the main storyline is about a teenage girl who becomes pregnant unexpectedly, it was found that male characters verbally scored higher in their powerful verbal expressions.

Another example is a remarkable Disney’s animation film, *Frozen* (2013). The film’s story seems to portray two strong female protagonists. The main characters are Elsa, the elder princess who was born with power to manipulate ice and snow, and Anna, Elsa’s younger sister who overcomes a dangerous mission to save her sister and kingdom. At first glance, they both seem to gain freedom to have complete control of their fortunes. However, the two princesses literally put

their effort in very different levels of power and ability to control over their own destinies (Langston, 2017). Interestingly, according to the verbal analysis program, it can be examined that the princess Elsa is the only one who achieves her high power and positive agency. In contrast, Anna is actually portrayed with the same low power levels as Cinderella, who is the main character in Disney’s animation film released more than 60 years ago.

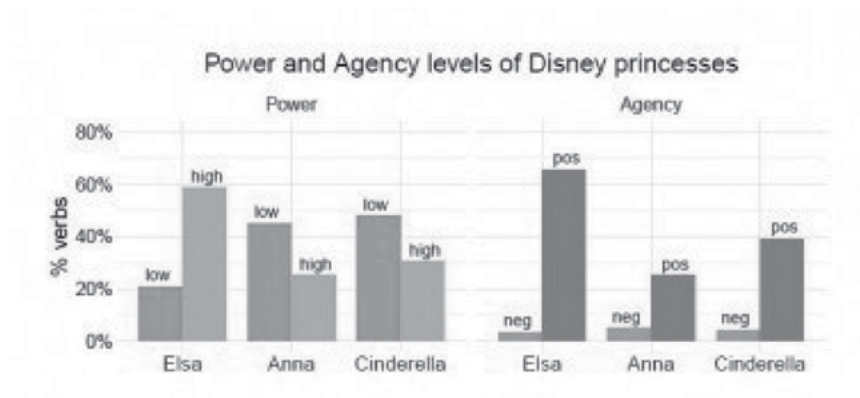


Figure3: Power and agency levels of Anna comparing with Elsa and Cinderella. (<http://www.washington.edu>)

Conclusion

Film making language is another form of language which builds up filmmaker’s perspective through its coded use of filmmaker’s systems of their elaborate cinematic techniques. Once a film is produced, verbal and non-verbal mechanisms consciously aim to influence the viewer’s emotions and unconsciously serve to construct or inscribe sexual hegemony in the film. Verbally, the imbalanced power relations are revealed through analysis of screenplays and dialogues. Apparently, patriarchy value can be detected in the language use of more active and imperative sentences together with powerful word choices spoken by male characters rather than female protagonists. Regarding non-verbal mechanism, it was found that, apart from costumes, the use of signs and “gaze” also serve to represent female lead characters as subservient to masculinity.

With or without consciousness, the film can affect the film watchers’ attitudes and behaviors. To create awareness among the film viewers, media literacy is

essential. They should always be aware that film is a kind of discourse. Whereas a story of seems to exist in cinematic world, viewers should aware that this story is constructed by the filmmakers. It is a portrayal of their beliefs, values, their perspectives, their experiences and their interpretations.

Superficially, several female main characters are given power in the narrative sense but those characters are oppressed in a deeper level of visual and verbal interpretations. By looking at films as a means of reflecting the sexual hierarchy, the female protagonists in those films are portrayed as subordinate to male characters to a large extent. Mostly in Hollywood films, such patriarchal approach is likely to continue as there are more male film makers than female in such film industry. Consequently, film watchers, should increase their media literacies of the portrayal of the femininity so that they cannot be influenced by the pseudo-feminism.

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